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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000324

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SUBJECT: ONCE MORE UNTO THE BREACH: WOMEN VIE IN KUWAIT'S
MAY PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

REF: A. KUWAIT 308
[1](#)B. KUWAIT 224

Classified By: Political Counselor Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and
d

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Kuwaiti women stand a fair chance of winning their first seat in parliament during the upcoming May 16 election. A female candidate fell only 886 votes short of winning a seat in 2008, an outcome that showed a marked improvement over women's results in 2006. Coordination, training, and improved preparation of female candidates has increased in the past few years and this -- combined with an upward trend in female voter turnout -- bodes well for the possibility that at least one female candidate could take a seat in May. End summary.

2006 and 2008 elections: moving closer to victory

[1](#)2. (C) Since obtaining full political rights in 2005, Kuwaiti women have edged progressively closer to securing a first seat in parliament. In 2006, thirty-two women were among the 402 candidates vying for one of the National Assembly's fifty seats, with Dr. Rola Dashti coming closest to succeeding. Dashti received 1,539 votes but needed 3,419 more votes to win a seat in her district. Estimated female voter turnout in the 2006 election was forty-four percent. In 2008, twenty-seven female candidates contested the election and female voter turnout increased to fifty percent. Dr. Aseel Al-Awadi, a political newcomer, received 5,173 votes -- just 886 short of winning a seat. Dashti placed second with 4,464 votes, but enough voters reportedly saw her as "too Western" and "not Kuwaiti enough" to prevent her from crossing the finish line. If women do win a seat in the upcoming election, it will likely be in Kuwait's third district (where Al-Awadi came close in 2008) or in the second district, where Salwa Al-Jassar fell short of victory by just 1,422 votes last year.

Challenges: Little time and less visibility

[1](#)3. (C) As in 2006 and 2008, candidates have only two months to campaign in preparation for the upcoming May 16 election due to a constitutional requirement that elections occur within sixty days of a parliamentary dissolution. This hurdle disadvantages inexperienced and relatively unknown female candidates. Incumbents have the advantage of name recognition and, in past elections, have usually won about thirty of the parliament's fifty seats. Women are further disadvantaged by the fact that most diwanis, traditional

salon-style evening gatherings which serve as forums for Kuwaiti politicking, are male-only. Increasingly, however, women are beginning to attend more liberal diwanis and even organizing their own. 2006 candidate Laila Al-Rashid told PolOff that if she runs this year, she will hold both all-male and all-female diwanis -- a strategy that could garner votes but also increases the already high cost of campaigning.

Tanami: Kuwait's first political association for women

¶4. (C) There was little coordinated effort evident among the female candidates in 2006. However, on March 6, 2008, several female activists launched Tanami (which means "gradual development" in Arabic), the first women's political association in Kuwait. In the run-up to the 2008 election, Tanami held several seminars and training courses (largely with the assistance of NDI) for some of the candidates. After the election, however, many of the female candidates criticized Tanami for not supporting all female candidates equally. On March 23, 2009, Tanami kicked off the campaign season with a televised conference of thirty prominent liberal and Islamist Kuwaiti politicians (ref A), including women's rights activists Nouriya Al-Saddani, Khawla Al-Ateeqi and Dr. Khadija Al-Mahmeed.

Comment: U.S. interests

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¶5. (C) Embassy believes Kuwaiti women stand a chance of winning their first seat in parliament on May 16 should the previous leading candidates choose to run. Whether they will choose to stay in the race remains unclear in the current clouded political environment. Unfortunately, speculation that the Amir may name current Defense Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad Al Sabah as Prime Minister -- and that Jaber Al Sabah's tenure as Prime Minister will lead inevitably to an unconstitutional dissolution of parliament -- has given a number of candidates, male and female, second thoughts.

¶6. (C) The increased electoral involvement of Kuwaiti women -- who amount to hundreds of thousands of Kuwaiti citizens who were previously excluded from government and political life -- marks a significant transition in Kuwait's political culture. To an extent largely unmatched in other Gulf states, Kuwaiti women, including those in middle age, are broadly well-educated, "Westernized," and professionally integrated into a range of economic and social sectors. Ironically, the timing of their long overdue political empowerment has coincided with another current in Kuwaiti society, which is the growing role of the conservative "tribalist" Kuwaiti demographic (ref B), and the tendency of tribal women to follow the voting instructions of their male kin. These opposing trends promise some interesting debates as Kuwaitis face their future.

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